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ABSTRACT

Living in a society that is quick to label and condemn, has been, and continues to be a source of pain for African-Americans. However, society's microscope has for sometime had a one dimensional lens, particularly when examining the coping styles of African-American male-female relationships within the African-American family. There exists a great need to study African-American relationships, but it is necessary to point out the strengths in these relationships instead of focusing and magnifying the negative, which may result from culturally inappropriate interpretations of the data. Following a review of the literature findings are discussed and critically analyzed in an attempt to bring to the forefront of African-American male-female relationships variables that have allowed them to survive and prosper. Researchers have noticed the need to look at positive coping styles, as new research is beginning to appear that looks at this trend in relationships, as well as the relationship of external factors in reported dysfunctions and dissatisfactions in an attempt to empower those individuals who still believe in positive male/female relationships in the African-American family. Taylor (1990) found that marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction among African-Americans depended on the amount of internalized racism of the individuals. This has major implications for understanding some problems with these relationships and also provides a different focus for therapy. This paper will focus on locating strengths of African-Americans relationships. Attention will be given to alternative methods of interpreting behaviors previously mislabeled as ineffective, and world view will be introduced as a variable to consider when discussing coping and relationship satisfaction. This will be done in order to provide researchers needed information in the continued exploration of African-American male-female relationships. (Author/AA)

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EFFECTIVE COPING STRATEGIES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

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Effective Coping Strategies Employed in
African-American Relationships

Abstract

Living in a society that is quick to label and condemn, has been, and continues to be a source of pain for African-Americans. However, society's microscope has for sometime had a one dimensional lens, particularly when examining the coping styles of African-American male-female relationships within the African-American family. There exists a great need to study African-American relationships, but it is necessary to point out the strengths in these relationships instead of focusing, and magnifying the negative, which may result from culturally inappropriate interpretations of the data. A review of the literature will be completed, and the findings will be discussed and critically analyzed in an attempt to bring to the forefront of African-American male-female relationships variables that have allowed them to survive and prosper. Researchers have noticed the need to look at positive coping styles, as new research in beginning to appear that looks at this trend in relationships, as well as the relationship of external factors in reported dysfunctions and dissatisfactions in an attempt to empower those individuals who still believe in positive male/female relationships in the African-American family. Taylor (1990) found that marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction among African-Americans depended on the amount of internalized racism of the individuals. This has major implications for understanding some problems with these relationships and also provides a different focus for therapy. This presentation will focus locating strengths of African-Americans relationships. Attention will be given to alternative methods of interpreting behaviors previously mislabeled as ineffective, and world view will be introduced as a variable to consider when discussing coping and relationship satisfaction. This will be done in order to provide researchers needed information in the continued exploration of African-American male-female relationships.

Statement of the Problem

Understanding the impact of culture on coping is imperative. To work effectively with African-Americans, it is important, also, to become familiar with the research on African-American families, their variety of structures, and the effects of diverse childhood family patterns on the perceptions of their members (Thomas & Dansby, 1985). How well African-Americans cope with stress has been the subject of rancorous debate between proponents of two diverse perspectives: a pathological perspective and a strength-resiliency perspective. These perspectives clash in regard to the degree to which African-American families are characterized by stability, order, and effective adaptation to life stress (Barbarin, 1983; Dodson, 1981 & Martin & Martin, 1978).

The pathological-disorganization view emphasizes deviance and weaknesses of the African-American family emanating from slavery and culminating in what it describes as the single-parent, matriarchical and disorganized Black family of today. The strength-resiliency perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the capacity of African-American families to survive past

oppression, current racial discrimination, and economic deprivation to cope with life stress (Barbarin, 1983). Wade Nobles (1974), has been very vocal in expressing his beliefs in this arena and provides a broadly accepted point of departure for research on African-American family stress and coping in his assertion that the current life circumstances of African-Americans, their African heritage, and the historical experiences of slavery all contribute to the evolution of a unique social identity, viable family structures, and adaptive patterns of family coping.

Regrettably, there are extensive gaps in the psychological data to inform us about the specific ways in which African-American individuals and families cope with stressful events. Barbarin (1983), points out that there has been little research which attempts to map the psychological interior of African-American functioning. Fortunately, the most recent work on African-American families suggests movement away from sterile and counterproductive arguments about how well African-American families cope toward research dealing with the fundamental issue of discovering ways in which African-Americans cope (Barbarin, 1983).

What is a healthy family? How does one define competent functioning? When attempting to address these issues basic Eurocentric, middle-class assumptions must be questioned (Thomas & Dansby, 1985). Many researchers are contending that much could be learned from studying the coping styles of African-American families which have developed through generations of suffering (Barbarin, 1985; Simms-Brown, 1982; Thomas & Dansby, 1985). Therefore, the adaptive coping strategies of African-American families will be discussed in this paper. Literature in the areas of Black families and coping will be reviewed and various coping strategies will be identified. An attempt will be made to discuss the cultural relevance of these strategies and to comment on whether or not these considerations have been addressed in the current literature.

Review of Literature

Over the last two decades, psychologists and counselors have begun to look at models of the stress process as frameworks both for conceptualizing human problems in living and for intervening to prevent and treat such problems. Although the stress and coping

perspective is inherently concerned with the effects of social and environmental forces on human functioning, explicit attention to the role of culture in the process whereby environmental stressors affect individuals is relatively rare in this literature (Slavin, Rainer, McCreary & Gowda, 1991).

Coping can be defined as cognitive and behavioral attempts to change tolerate or avoid problematic situations, or stressors, including attempts to change, tolerate or avoid emotional responses to stressors. Conceptually and operationally coping has been viewed alternately as a personality trait: a 'style" or set of beliefs about how to approach problematic situations: or, as a set of specific strategies adopted in response to specific events or circumstances (Dressler, 1985).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), have pointed out that the way in which emotional reactions are expressed and managed hinges on the meaning and significance the culture gives to human transactions with the environment. This is an important acknowledgement when considering the coping strategies of African-Americans, as many researchers are beginning to look at world view and its effect on individuals and groups.

American culture is dominated by a belief in individualism, that is, the belief that each of us is an entity separate from every other, and from the group and as such is endowed with natural rights. The social order of the majority culture is guided by an acceptance of individualism, which is reflected in encouragement and recognition of individual achievements and accomplishments, especially the attainment of material property. Given the status of many African-Americans, generally individualism has not been the pathway to the American Dream, this is believed to be so , at least partially due to the inconsistencies of this worldview with that of the ancestral worldviews of African-Americans (Harrison et al., 1990).

The Africentric worldview of many African-Americans is believed to be a strength taught and followed in African-American families. This worldview, unlike the European worldview, stresses that the interest and well being of the self is interwoven with the ethnic group to which one belongs. African-Americans view the self as being an extension of 'nature, families, households, communities and the group. Thus when confronted with stressors in the American society, such as, racism

discrimination, occupational barriers and negative portrayals of their ethnic group, their ancestral world view may be used as an adaptive strategy for pathways to personal achievement and sense of personal worth.

This points a need for further research on the effect of world view on coping. Studies should compare those with a more Africentric world view and those with a more Eurocentric world view on various dimensions of coping to see if coping is effected more by world view or race. This would also provide an avenue for explaining why some families who seem to possess the same coping strategies, ie, extended families, religiosity, etc., appear to cope differently. Perhaps some African-American families have adapted to a more European worldview, while others use a more Africentric worldview. Research in this area could provide a wealth of data to be used in understanding the effects of worldview in coping.

Most research in the area of coping divides coping styles into one of two types: an active coping style aimed at directly influencing the problematic situation; or a defensive style aimed at avoiding the situation and controlling the emotional response to it (Barbarin,1983 & Slavin, Rainer, McCreary & Gowda, 1991).

Most research encourages the use of active coping as it has been found to be related to less perceived stress, fewer symptoms, or lowered risk of psychiatric impairment, fewer psychosomatic complaints and lowered blood pressure (Dressler, 1985). However, in another study using an African-American sample drawn from a small southern city, Dressler (1985), found that African-American males high on the dimension of active coping were more likely to meet the barriers of institutionalized racism head on. He also stated that these men, as a result were more likely to be unstably employed and more likely to be passed over for promotions and raises. These men, too, tended to experience chronic dissatisfactions in their jobs. In a similar study, African-Americans were found to have higher blood pressure if they had an active coping style (James, Harnett & Kelsbeck, 1983).

Dressler suggests that these results on active coping provide basis for an alternate subsidiary hypothesis: that is, it may be a more effective strategy for African-American males to focus on their own emotional responses to stressful situations. Perhaps in the African-American community, males who cope with

stressors by attempting to control their negative emotional (or distressing) responses (defensive coping style) are able to avoid the deleterious consequences of that distress. This finding, if true, may account for why some Black males have higher blood pressure and are at risk for other stress related illnesses. Perhaps, these men are coping using the "normative" active coping style despite its possible negative effect on their health.

Another interesting consideration is that in the same study, Dressler found that African-American women who had an active coping style, or a belief in their own ability to manage stressful situations had fewer reported psychological or psychosomatic symptoms in relation to high stress levels. African-American males, on the other hand, were actually adversely effected by an active coping style. For males, a more effective coping style was one of emotional control, consisting of projecting an image of being unconcerned with, or unaffected by stressors.

It is interesting to speculate about the effects of this obvious difference in coping on the male-female relationship. It would be easy to conclude that this

dichotomy would lead to stress, arguments and differences. However, this author believes that this dichotomy has instead been used as an adaptive positive coping strategy by African-American male and females in their relationships, resulting in phenomena, such as, egalitarian relationships, dual family workers, extended care givers, etc. African-American males historically and presently have been victimized by oppression, racism, discrimination, as have African-American males. However, many believe that men have suffered to a greater extinct in that they have not been able to be assertive in society. This is supported in the finding on coping styles. Yet, instead of this difference in coping being viewed as problematic, it can be seen as complimentary by allowing each individual to contribute to the relationship in ways which are socially acceptable, although, they may appear abnormal when judged against Eurocentric values. These differences may be necessary when the historical and present circumstances of African-Americans is considered.

There are obvious differences in the rights and privileges afforded to males and females. However, African-American women have been instrumental to the

emotional and financial welfare of families for sometime. Davenport & Yurich (1991), state that slavery served to break down the African patriarchy, as the slave owner assumed the role of chief patriarch and decision maker. They continue that the lack of economic dependence on the male, combined with the equally harsh treatment women suffered, led these women, African-American slaves, to what has been labeled a "negative equality".

This "negative equality has lead to many stereotypes as seen in media and even in psychological literature. The stereotype of the African-American matriarchal family is all too common. The woman has been stereotyped as domineering and castrating, and the man as irresponsible and unavailable. What is the truth? Simms-Brown (1982) does an excellent job of showing the stereotype of African-American women as sometimes being a result of not understanding the culture or history of African-Americans and judging them solely against the Eurocentric idea of family. She argues that the female is African-American relationships is a helpmate, not a dominant mate. This author agrees, and sees African-American womens' ability to respond to social forces, such as oppression, racism, discrimination, etc., while recognizing that these forces

may be stronger for her mate as a strength and effective coping strategy for herself and her relationship.

Perhaps one should not be surprised that the differential effects of copying styles would manifest in relation to gender. Gender roles are a fundamental dimension of social structure. In nearly all societies the duties, obligations, privileges, rights, prestige and power of individuals are differently allocated along gender lines. The African-American community is of no exception. It is necessary to further hypothesize as to why African-American females tend to be fine using an active coping style, while males are not. What effect, if any, does this have on interpersonal relationships among African-Americans, is this a naturally occurring phenomena or a necessary adaptation or strategy employed by this group. In light of the current concerns of African-American males and the belief that they are more at risk for numerous social ills this finding warrants further investigation.

Accepting that oppression has shaped the lives of African-Americans means being able to acknowledge the naturally occurring adaptations to survival many African-Americans have come to use. The large amount of dual-

worker families among African-American families may affect the participation of all family members in child care and household maintenance. In turn this may have prevented the development of stereotyped sexrole (Barbarin, 183; Thomas & Dansby, 1985). In addition, decision making in African-American relationships has been described as egalitarian with the wives assuming an important role in determining the outcome of important family issues. Thus, the perspectives and role of African-American women in relationships and family functioning may be different, not deficient, than that of white women.

For example, Hauenstein (1977) compared white and black wives and found that black wives reported fewer difficulties in coping with their lives, were more achievement oriented, gave greater emphasis to personal and financial advancement, and had a more optimistic view of their futures than did white wives. Furthermore, black women found more satisfaction in their maternal role, felt it important to be good mothers and earn respect of their children. At the same time, they were more critical and independent with respect to evaluating the quality of their marriage than were whites. This

suggests a healthy emotional differentiation from their spouses and experience of autonomy. This autonomy, however, occurs within a context of cooperation, cohesion, and commitment to marriage, and family life (Barbarian, 1983). This can be viewed as a strength of African-American women and their relationships, and perhaps this is an outcome of them being able to use an personal, active coping style.

Mentioned were just a few coping strategies that are used by African-Americans. Some coping strategies of African-Americans have been considered maladaptive when viewed in direct comparison of white couples and families. However, this author believes that when looking at these various coping strategies of African-Americans within a cultural, historical and economical context, one can easily begin to see the adaptiveness and strengths of these coping strategies. One may also begin to see these strengths as being viable, and perhaps necessary, not only for African-Americans, but for other minority and majority members who need to find ways of dealing with situational factors that call for an adaptive way of coping that may not be found in the "normal" ways in which relationships and family life have

been portrayed in the white American society. Introducing the variable of world view into relationship satisfaction creates a new way of framing problems and solutions and provides an additional variable to be considered when selecting romantic partners, and/or evaluating relationship quality. Consideration of this variable could provide valuable information to the couple, as well as the therapist, to use in framing relationship problems and suggesting more appropriate interventions. Relationship quality/satisfaction affects various other areas, such as, parenting attitudes, and child outcomes (Taylor, 1990). If world view is shown to be related to coping and relationship satisfaction, it may also affect other areas of functioning, thus providing ideas and data for future studies, allowing for a better understanding of the impact of world view in various areas of coping.

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